



### **The New Liberalism: Reconciling Liberty and Community**

Avital Simhony and David Weinstein (eds.)

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This volume seeks to shed new light on the liberal–communitarian debate that dominated political philosophy in the 1980s. Whilst the original lines of the debate have virtually disappeared in the face of the recognition that the positions of the antagonists were not as dissimilar as initially thought, *The New Liberalism* does offer a refreshing take on the main issue: the incompatibility of individual rights and communal attachments.

Rather than offering another interpretative account of the original debate, the essays in this volume explore the largely untapped resources of the works of turn-of-the-twentieth century liberal thinkers such as Green, Hobhouse, Hobson, Dewey, and Bosanquet. These new (as opposed to contemporary) liberals wrestled in detail with the very dilemmas about liberty and community that reappeared in the period following the publication of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Thus, part of the rationale for this collection is that it provides 'a curative to the partial and debilitating amnesia afflicting contemporary liberalism's historical self-understanding' (8). Contemporary liberals, that is, neglect an important body of work in their own tradition when defending themselves against communitarianism.

The essays tackle the intertwined issues of liberty and community from a variety of angles. The contributions by Freeden, Martin, and Simhony address the perceived conceptual conflict directly by exploring various aspects of the new liberals' writings. Vincent's piece focuses more specifically on the place of citizenship in new liberalism, and Meadowcroft's opens up a comparison with contemporary (anti-perfectionist) variants of liberalism by examining the respective roles attributed to the state. Morrow's explores the concept of property in relation to rights and community, and Gaus's illustrates how an organic conception of community can lead to economic individualism, rather than the welfare state. Ryan's piece addresses Dewey's democratic concerns, and Weinstein's draws out the debt new liberals owe to the utilitarian tradition. The volume is well constructed, and the individual essays complement each other in terms of their focus. With the exception of Ryan's essay (which is based upon part of his longer work on Dewey), all the contributions are previously unpublished material.



The general thrust of the essays is that the new liberalism was as communitarian as it was liberal. The concern to ground individual rights in a conception of the common good loomed large in the work of most of these thinkers. As such, their achievements provide sophisticated resources for dealing with communitarian challenges. By ignoring their heritage, contemporary liberals have been forced to retread an already well-worn path.

Much of this rings true. The revival of political philosophy in the 1970s is largely attributed to Rawls. This revival, however, came at a cost. Rawls's work, by focussing so centrally on defending a specific conception of *justice*, had the effect of removing many other concerns to the periphery of political theorizing. That is, justice consumed virtually the entire spectrum of liberal politics, such that anything that was not capable of being articulated in terms of justice fell outside liberal concerns. The duties and virtues of citizenship is a case in point. Only recently have such issues re-established themselves firmly on the liberal agenda.

The new liberals, however, did not elevate justice to this primary position. Rather, they kept concerns about such things as community directly in view. Rooting individual rights in a common conception of the good allowed both the reconciliation of liberty and community, and the defence of a less narrow theoretical position (in terms of the framework of concerns). Most of the essays in this volume draw out the links between the new liberal arguments and the conceptions of community and citizenship articulated by the philosophers of antiquity (particularly Aristotle). As per the classical model, for one's life to go well meant, in part, that one performed one's role as a citizen. Being a good citizen was a component of a good life. For one's own life to flourish, the life of one's community also had to flourish. This is a thick conception of community, premised upon a common good. Justice played an important part in this view (setting the institutional framework of the state), but it was not the primary virtue. Also of importance to the success of the political enterprise was the character of citizens.

Vincent captures this point: 'The individual citizen assimilates ethical norms by participating in social life. Citizenship denoted a high level of civic awareness, moral character, rationality, and a strong sense of duty. Citizenship was integral to self-realization of the individual within the wider community' (209). The essays in this volume draw out and explore this classically inspired position in great depth, and with much care. To this end the essays are largely expository in nature. At times this tenor of historical excavation of liberal thought jars with the contemporary edge that references to the liberal-communitarian debate is supposed to give the volume. The soundness of the views of the thinkers considered would need further analysis if their positions are to offer potential solutions to the central questions of the contemporary debate (the nature of 'identity', and so forth).



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Similarly, the liberal position has developed in response to problems raised by the contemporary debate. Parts of the new liberal views considered appear to collide with these problems. For instance, most of the essays recognize that the new liberals articulate perfectionist positions as the necessary outcome of their stance on community and citizenship. That is, their political positions — such as their views on the purposes of the state — are based upon wider ethical and metaphysical views about human flourishing. In a world where, not unreasonably, many citizens reject such ethical views, perfectionism is a highly controversial liberal position. Without further defence, such liberals risk undermining political legitimacy. Where legitimacy rests on the consent of citizens, enforcing a political framework based on ethical views they reject (for, say, religious reasons) is hardly likely to draw their consent. How the new liberals might defend their positions against such concerns would be interesting, and would provide a greater contemporary edge.

This notwithstanding, this is a collection of essays valuable in its own right. The volume assembles a renowned set of scholars who write with detailed understanding of a neglected part of the liberal tradition. It provides an excellent road map to a rich vein of political theorizing, and performs well its task of showing how an understanding of liberalism is seriously deficient without a knowledge of the new liberals.

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